

LESSON 1

Understanding History

THINKING FOCUS

How do historians learn about the past?

Key Terms

- prehistory
- fossil
- artifact
- oral tradition
- primary source
- secondary source

► During the eruption, many people were buried in volcanic ash. The bodies later decayed, but the impressions left were preserved in the hardened ash. Archaeologists then filled the impressions with plaster to make casts of the victims, like the one shown here.

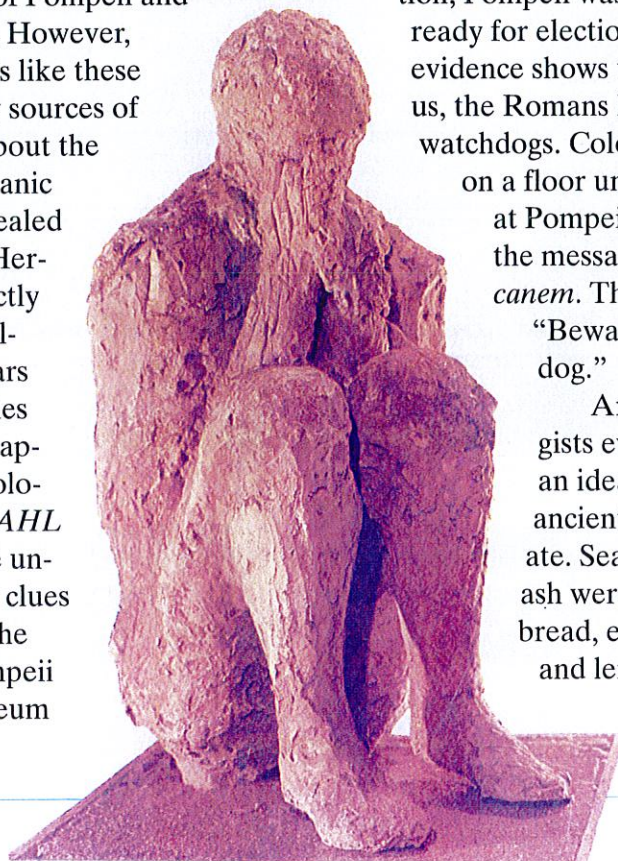
My mother now began to beg, urge, and command me to escape as best I could. . . . I replied that I would not be saved without her. Taking her by the hand, I hurried her along. . . . And now came the ashes, but at first sparsely. I turned around. Behind us, an ominous thick smoke, spreading over the earth like a flood, followed us. . . . To be heard were only the shrill cries of women, the wailing of children, the shouting of men. Some were calling to their parents, others to their children, others to their wives—knowing one another only by voice.

Pliny the Younger, from letters written to the historian Tacitus

Pliny the Younger wrote this about the eruption of the volcano Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79, when he was just 18 years old. His letters give valuable information about the disaster that destroyed the Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. However, written records like these aren't the only sources of information about the eruption. Volcanic lava and ash sealed Pompeii and Herculaneum exactly as they were almost 2,000 years ago, so the cities are like time capsules. Archaeologists (*ahr kee AHL uh jihsts*) have uncovered many clues that tell how the people of Pompeii and Herculaneum lived.

For example, one wall painting in Pompeii shows the games that were being held in the local sports arena. Campaign slogans on other walls within the city show that, at the time of the volcano's eruption, Pompeii was getting ready for elections. Other evidence shows that, like us, the Romans kept watchdogs. Colored tiles on a floor uncovered at Pompeii spell out the message *cave canem*. This means, "Beware of the dog."

Archaeologists even have an idea of what ancient Romans ate. Sealed in the ash were loaves of bread, eggs, nuts, and lentils.



Historical Evidence



Pliny's letter and the wall paintings at Pompeii are examples of the two kinds of sources historians use to study the past: written sources and nonwritten sources. To learn about the past, historians must seek out as many different sources as they possibly can, both written and nonwritten, and then try to find out what they mean.

Kinds of Sources

To most people, written sources mean books. But to historians, written sources might also be letters, diaries, speeches, popular songs, poems, business records, or campaign slogans. They could be the marks on ancient tombs or old calendars and maps—anything with writing on it.

Anything written down can give historians clues about the people and events of the past. However, written sources only go back to about 3000 B.C. That's

when writing developed in Mesopotamia, an ancient country in what is now the Middle East. History before the development of writing is called **prehistory**. To learn about prehistoric times, historians must rely completely on nonwritten sources.

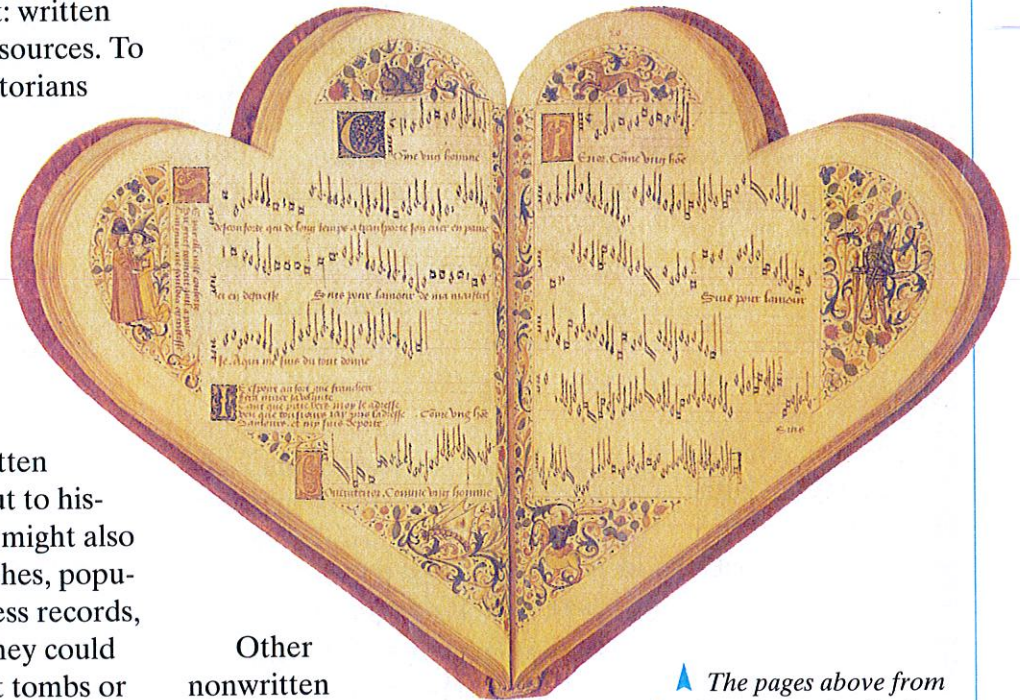
Nonwritten sources include **fossils**—the remains or imprints of once-living plants or animals. Dinosaur fossils, for example, can tell about the kinds of dinosaurs that lived in a certain time and place.

Other nonwritten sources are **artifacts**, or objects made by humans. Ancient jewelry, tools, coins, and toys teach about the customs and beliefs of people of the past.

Still other nonwritten sources are tombs, monuments, and even entire cities. The streets and buildings of Pompeii, preserved beneath the ashes, give a picture of life as it was in A.D. 79.

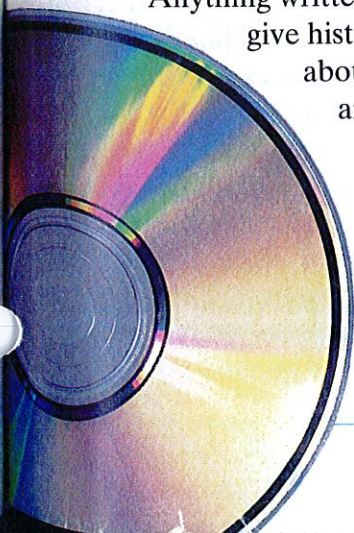
Another important nonwritten source is a culture's **oral tradition**,

◀ This ancient carving of Egyptian scribes is a nonwritten source. The carving shows that the Egyptians wrote with penlike instruments.



▲ The pages above from a French songbook of 1470 are a valuable written source. They show how music was written down at the time.

◀ Will today's compact discs like the one at left be a nonwritten source for historians of the future?



the legends, myths, and beliefs passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation. Over time, many myths and legends have been written down. For example, the legend of King Odysseus was part of the ancient Greek oral tradition. It was finally written down by the Greek poet Homer between 800 and 700 B.C., and it is Homer's version that is known today.

The Historian's Job

Historians do not just collect facts. They also must examine the information they collect and then decide how to interpret it. Doing this carefully often can take a long time. For example, in the 400s B.C., a Greek historian named Thucydides (*thoo SID ih deez*) spent 27 years studying the war between the Greek city-states of Athens and Sparta. Here is how Thucydides

UNDERSTANDING ORAL TRADITION

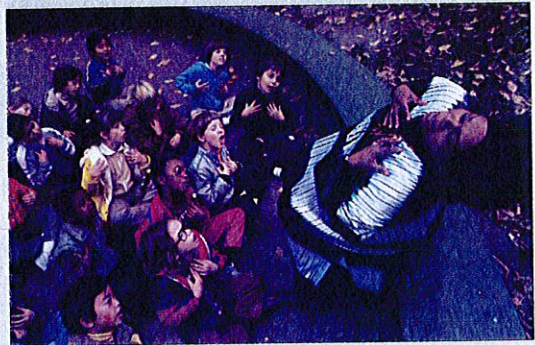
Legends describe ancient events, such as how people first learned to make iron tools and spears. According to the oral tradition of the Yoruba people in Nigeria, they learned to make iron from Ogun, one of their orishas, or gods. The legends, stories, ideas, customs, and beliefs that a culture passes on by word of mouth make up its oral tradition.

Word of Mouth

An oral tradition may change from generation to generation as the interests, opinions, fears, and needs of each generation change.

How useful is oral tradition to historians if accounts told by word of mouth change and become inaccurate? Historians can't be sure that an oral tradition portrays events

from long ago accurately. However, oral traditions do tell about the kinds of things that were important to people of the times.



A Source of Information

Ancient cultures that existed before the development of writing depended on oral tradition to communicate their ideas and record events. Through oral traditions the elders taught the younger members of the society about their culture. This is why historians are interested in oral traditions.

India and China are two places where ancient oral traditions are still remembered and passed on. But in many places oral traditions have been forgotten. Historians can

only learn about the oral traditions of most ancient cultures if someone has recorded them in writing.

The oral tradition still exists in modern societies, side by side with written records. In most African societies, especially West African, the storyteller is an important member of society who records family histories and recites them on special occasions.

Historians must be careful when interpreting oral tradition. Nevertheless, oral tradition can be a useful source for information about people of the past.

described the difficult job of the historian:

He must not be misled by the exaggerated fancies of the poets, or by the tales of chroniclers who seek to please the ear rather than speak the truth. . . . At such a distance of time he must make up his mind to be satisfied with conclusions resting upon the clearest evidence which can be had. . . . Of the events of the war I have not ventured to speak from any chance information, nor according to any notion of my own; I have described nothing but what I either saw myself, or learned from others of whom I made the most careful and particular enquiry. The task was a laborious one, because eye-witnesses of the same occurrences gave different accounts of them, as they remembered or were interested in the actions of one side or the other.

Thucydides, 400s B.C.

The Interpretation of Sources

As Thucydides says, sources are open to interpretation. Has one of your teachers ever asked you to tell your side of the story after a disagreement with another student? Did your version differ from your friend's?

Now consider two written records of a war—one from the winner's point of view; one from the loser's. How might the two be different?

Historians must keep in mind that everyone has his or her own point of view. Whether or not the author of a source is a man or a woman, rich or poor, or young or old will affect the way he or she sees and describes an event.

Nonwritten sources are, of course, also open to interpretation. Suppose, for example, that archaeologists uncover the remains of an ancient walled structure. Some historians might think it is a fort. Others, however, might argue it is a cattle corral. ■



▲ Can you identify the modern-day artifacts shown above? Imagine the difficulty interpreting ancient artifacts.

■ What kinds of sources do historians use to learn about the past?

The Evaluation of Sources

Historians ask questions about a source to determine how accurate and useful it is. A historian studying Pliny's account of the eruption would start by asking these questions:

Who was the writer? Pliny was a well-educated young man from a wealthy family. He had studied science under his uncle. As a result, his description of the process of the eruption is very valuable to historians. They want to know how the writer's background might affect his or her account.

What kind of source is it? Pliny's account was one of many

letters he wrote about life in the Roman Empire. His letters have given historians valuable information about the life and politics of the Roman Empire.

Different kinds of sources offer different kinds of information. Letters or diaries, for example, may tell a great deal about people's daily lives. Political speeches, on the other hand, might help explain a government's policies.

When was the source produced? Pliny wrote his description of the eruption shortly after it happened. Sources produced during the same time period as the events

Across Time & Space

In the early 1800s, the British artist Sir William Gell visited and sketched the houses of Pompeii as they might have looked before the eruption of Vesuvius. His drawings helped make Pompeii popular. In fact, people began building new houses in the Pompeian style.



▲ Compare the photo above with the painting on the next page. Both depict eruptions of Mt. Vesuvius. What can you learn from each?

■ Why do historians ask questions about their sources?

they describe are called **primary sources**. Materials that were created later by people who studied the original sources are called **secondary sources**. The photo at the top of this page shows the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 1944. Because the photo records an event at the time of the event, it is a primary source. The painting of Mt. Vesuvius on the next page shows the eruption of A.D. 79. However, the painting wasn't made until 1785, so it's a secondary source.

Primary sources are generally more valuable to historians than

are secondary sources. They are likely to be more accurate because they were recorded when the event was fresh in people's minds.

Where was the source produced? Pliny's account was an eyewitness account. Therefore, it is more valuable to historians than one written by someone who merely heard about the disaster. Even if a source was produced during the time period of the event, historians want to know if the author was actually at the event.

Why was the source produced? Pliny wrote about the eruption in let-

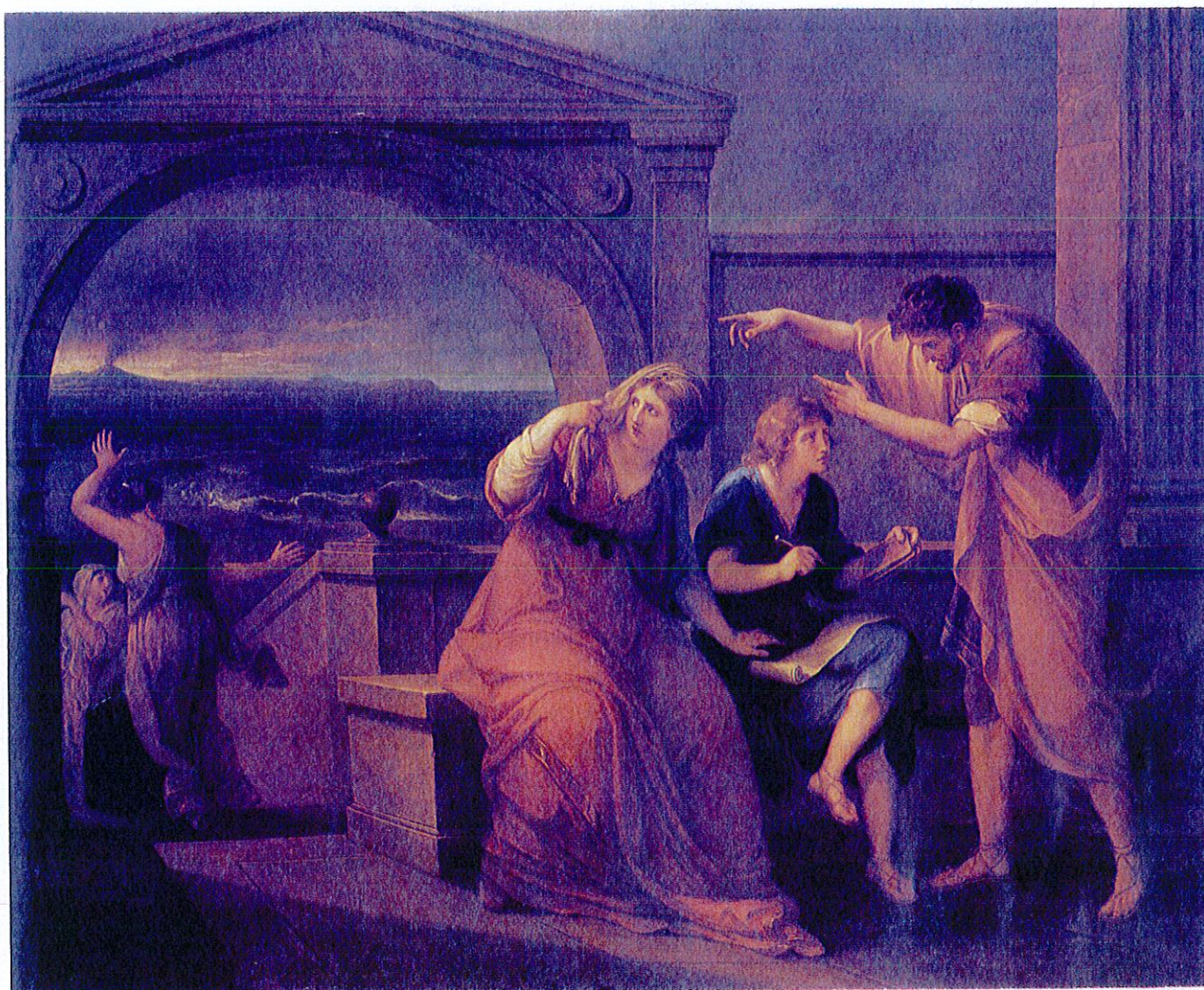
ters to the Roman historian Tacitus. Most of Pliny's letters were a mix of historical information and literature. Writing such letters was a fashionable thing for wealthy young Roman men to do.

Writers have many different reasons for writing. One writer may just want to describe an event. Another might want to prove a point, impress someone, or make someone else look bad. Understanding why a source was produced helps historians judge the accuracy of the information that is presented. ■

The Puzzle of History

History has been called a conversation between the present and the past. People of the past communicate with people of today through the writing, artifacts, and structures they leave behind.

Each generation has historians who gather and evaluate sources of information about the past. However, the way these historians interpret the sources they find varies from generation to generation.



After all, every generation sees the world differently. And because each generation and each individual looks at things from a new point of view, history is always open to different interpretations.

History also has been compared to a jigsaw puzzle. Some pieces of the puzzle have been lost forever. Pieces once considered

lost have now been found. The available pieces can be fitted together in many ways. Each generation of historians tries to put together the available pieces of the puzzle and to interpret the picture that emerges. In doing so, they hope to understand not only what happened in the past, but how it happened, and why it happened. ■

▲ In 1785, artist Angelica Kauffmann painted the A.D. 79 eruption of Mt. Vesuvius. Pliny the Younger studies with his mother at Misenum as they learn of the eruption.

■ Why do historians study the past?

R E V I E W

Please answer the following *in complete sentences* in your notebook.

1. Name one piece of information discovered when Pompeii and Herculaneum were uncovered.
2. What sources do historians use to understand history?
3. What is the difference between primary and secondary sources?